

HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN THE MODERN ARABIC NOVEL *THE DRUZE OF BELGRADE*

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True historical events and figures are generally the basis of any historical novel, but a novel requires a literary form created by the imagination. Usually, the author introduces a combination of real and imagined facts. In his historical novel Durūz Bilḡrād. Hikāyat Ḥannā Ya‘qūb (The Druze of Belgrade), Rabī‘ Ġābir relied on several historical facts, enhancing them by the inclusion of events that could have occurred in that era, as well as introducing figures that could have existed. Some real characters are given pseudonyms and invented details of their behavior. This article examines the effects and effectiveness of the imaginary elements in this novel and assesses the degree to which the author succeeded in his objectives by the inclusion of those created characters and events. Furthermore, it analyses the nature of the relationship between the historical period chosen by Rabī‘ Ġābir and the actual political and social reality in Lebanon to which the figures and events of this novel belong.

Introduction

The historical novel, which appeared in the 19th century with *The Waverley Novels* by Sir Walter Scott, from Scotland, in 1814¹, is regarded as a model for literary composition among novelists in Arab countries as well.

Modern Arabic literature produced several types of historical novel. Ġurḡī Zaydān (1861-1914) wrote a series of novels on Islamic history. In each novel he chose a topic centered on some aspect of Islamic history. The main plot was based on historical facts combined with imagination through the introduction of a few fictitious characters and a small romance to give the text the aspect of a novel.

Another form of the Arabic historical novel used history as a pretext to mask political messages linked to present events and thus avoid censorship. A strong similarity between events and historical personages, and actual realistic personages and events, invite the reader to contemplate the present through the prism of the past. The Moroccan critic Sa‘īd Yaḡfīn wrote: «When we say: “a historical novel”, that means that we came out of history as a “science”, into the novel as “fiction” or “imagination”»².

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¹ Ġurḡ Lūkātš, *al-Riwāyah al-ta’rīḥiyyah*, tarḡamat Šāliḥ Ġawwād, Dār al-Šu‘ūn al-Ṭaqāfiyyah al-‘Āmmah, Baḡdād 1986 (al-ṭab‘ah al-ṭāniyah), p. 11.

² Sa‘īd Yaḡfīn, *Riwāyat al-ḥayāl al-wāqi‘ī*, in “al-Quds al-‘arabī”, 01/02/2017, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%EF%BB%BFارواية-الخيال-الواقعي>.

The events of Rabī' Ġābir's³ novel *Durūz Bilġrād. Hikāyat Ḥannā Ya'qūb* (The Druze of Belgrade. Ḥannā Ya'qūb's Story, 2011)⁴ take place between Beirut and Belgrade and extend to most of the Balkans and Turkey and Syria, during the second half of the 19th century. Although based on real events which occurred in Lebanon in 1860 and their aftermath, the author built a fictional novel in which the actual history is only a starting point.

This article attempts to address the structure of narration in this historical novel.

1. Historical Events

Rabī' Ġābir was inspired by the Mount Lebanon civil war in 1860. Animosity between Christian Maronite peasants and their Druze overlords continued to increase, provoking constant conflicts. These led to a civil war, in which the Druze, who were better organized and secretly supported by Ḥūršīd Pasha, representing the Ottoman Empire in Beirut, were able to begin their great offensive. Finally, the Druze military were victorious, and this resulted in massacres against Christians in Mount Lebanon. This war resulted in heavy losses, mostly in the property and lives of Christians. Many villages were destroyed.

In his book *Les peuples et les civilisations du Proche Orient* the Lebanese historian Jawad Boulos wrote: «Gagnant Damas, l'effervescence antichrétienne, par le gouverneur ottoman de la ville, se traduit par une véritable boucherie où, pendant deux jours, les chrétiens sont massacrés et leurs maisons pillées et incendiées. L'intervention de l'émir Abdel Kader, qui avait combattu la France en Algérie et résidait à Damas, arracha à la mort 1.500 chrétiens environ»⁵.

³ Rabī' Ġābir is a Lebanese author, novelist and journalist, born in 1972 in Beirut. He was editor of "Āfāq" (Horizons), weekly cultural supplement of "al-Ḥayāh" daily pan-Arab international newspaper. He wrote 18 books in Arabic; most of them are novels and have been translated into many languages. His first novel *Sayyid al-'atmah* (Master of Darkness) was published in 1992. From his distinguished novels, we mention: *Rihlat al-ġarnāṭī* (The Journey of the Granadan, 2005), *al-I'tirāfāt* (Confessions, 2008), *Bīrūtūs. Madīnah tahta 'l-arḍ* (Byretus Underground City, 2009), *Amīrikā* (America, 2009), and *Durūz Bilġrād. Hikāyat Ḥannā Ya'qūb* for which he won in 2012 the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), also known as the Arabic Booker Prize.

⁴ Rabī' Ġābir, *Durūz Bilġrād. Hikāyat Ḥannā Ya'qūb*, Dār al-Tanwīr li 'l-Ṭībā'ah wa 'l-Našr, Bayrūt 2016 (al-ṭab'ah al-sādisah).

⁵ «Winning Damascus, the anti-Christian effervescence, excited by the Ottoman governor of the city; resulted in a real butchery; where for two days the Christians were massacred, and their homes looted and burned. The intervention of the Algerian Emir Abdel Kader saved about 1500 Christians». Jawad Boulos, *Les peuples et les civilisations du Proche Orient. Essai d'une histoire comparée des origines*

Upset by these atrocities, Europe intervened. French soldiers arrived in Beirut under the pretext «pour aider le Sultan à rétablir la paix»⁶. The true motive was for them to be present politically and military in Lebanon, which belonged to the Ottoman Empire.

To calm the unrest and stop the sedition, and to exclude interference from European governments, the Ottoman Empire took the lead and sent its Foreign Minister Fu'ād Pasha, a skilled diplomat who had been in regular contact with them. Invested with unlimited powers, he arrived in Damascus with the intention of sparing Syria and Lebanon the effects of European occupation. He sentenced 150 people to death who were considered guilty, including the Turkish governor of Damascus.

Another Lebanese historian, Kamāl Ṣalībī, explained in *Ta'rīḥ Lubnān al-ḥadīth* (History of Modern Lebanon, 1969) that Fu'ād Pasha intended to do the same in Beirut, but the circumstances were different. In Damascus, Muslim gunmen led by professional criminals, carried out murders and looting against unarmed Christians. In Beirut, it was a civil war between Druze and Christians⁷, and the retribution of an entire community was neither possible nor acceptable, especially since war crimes were committed by individuals. After investigations, the verdicts were handed down: those who had committed murder and looting were sentenced. As punishment for their crimes, about 500 Druze were forced into exile, most of them were sent to Tripoli (Libya); «70 were exiled to Belgrade»⁸.

On 5 September 1860, an international commission composed of France, Britain, Austria, Prussia, Russia and the Ottoman Empire met to investigate the causes of the events of 1860 and to recommend a new administrative and judicial system for Lebanon that would prevent the recurrence of such events. It was agreed that «Mount Lebanon would be preliminarily separated from Syria and reunited under a non-Lebanese Christian Mutasarrif (governor) appointed by the Ottoman sultan with the approval of the European powers»⁹. Mount Lebanon became a semi-autonomous Mutasarrifate¹⁰. At

à nos jours. Tome 5, Mouton & Co., La Haye, Paris, 1968, p. 164.

⁶ «[...] to help the Sultan in restoring peace». *Ibid*.

⁷ Kamāl Ṣalībī, *Ta'rīḥ Lubnān al-ḥadīth*, Dār al-Nahār, Bayrūt 1969 (al-ṭab'ah al-ṭāniyah), p. 146.

⁸ Exiling those Druze to Belgrade was mentioned in Ḥusayn Ġaḍbān Abū Saqrā; Yūsuf Ḥaṭṭār Abū Saqrā, *al-Ḥarakāt fī Lubnān ilā 'ahd al-Mutaṣarrifiyyah* (Movements in Lebanon up to the Mutasarrifate Era), ṭaharrā naṣṣahā wa 'allaqa ḥawāṣīhā wa malāḥiqahā wa waḍa'a muqaddimatahā wa fahārisahā 'Ārif Abū Ṣaqrā, Maṭba'at al-Ittiḥād, Bayrūt 1952, p. 146.

⁹ Asad Rustum, *Lubnān fī 'ahd al-Mutaṣarrifiyyah* (Lebanon in the Mutasarrifate Era), Dār al-Nahār, Bayrūt 1973, p. 35.

¹⁰ Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860*, Centre for Lebanese Studies-I. B. Tauris, London-New York 1994, p. 13; H. Vocke, *The Lebanese War: Its Origins and Political Dimensions*, Translated by

that time, it was a solution to stop the war, but it made the population groups in Lebanon subordinate, even indirectly, to the tutelage of foreign countries. It laid the foundation of many future conflicts.

2. *The Novel*

The novel begins at a place which has great importance in the narrative plot; in a prison. This indicates not only a place, but also an event, in addition to identifying the main character; therefore, it is a multi-dimensional description. The prologue, entitled “al-Ġabal al-Aswad (1872)” [Montenegro (1872)], is written in the form of a monologue, and narrated by the main character of the novel, Ḥannā Ya‘qūb, who recounts his experience in Balkan prisons after 12 years of forced exile, although he affirms he is innocent:

أيقظني الهدير وارتجاج الأرض. أين أنا؟ في حبس الهرسك أم في قلعة بلغراد؟ القيود الحديد منعني من النهوض لكنني أمدّ رقبتي ومن دون وعي أو شك أن أصبح كما في السنين البعيدة في بلدي البعيد: “بييض، ببيض، ببيض مسلووق”. أسمع ركضًا وصرًا ثمّ خطبات مرعبة فوقّي-على وجه الأرض- كأنّ حيوانات أسطورية عملاقة تتراكض وتقع وتموت. خوار فظيع يملأ الفضاء وأشتم رائحة اللحم الذي يحترق. الرعب يخترق عقلي كحدّ السيف. عرق بارد كالتلج يبيلّ جسمي. أتجمّد كما يحدث في الكوابيس [...] عارفًا أنّني قد لا أخرج من هنا [...] ¹¹.

The roar and the tremble awoke me. Where am I? In the custody of Herzegovina, or in Belgrade Castle? Iron cuffs prevented me from getting up, but I stretched my neck instinctively, and I almost became like in the far years in my far country. “Eggs, eggs, boiled eggs”. I hear people running and screaming and terrifying bangs above me – on the face of the earth – as if giant mythical animals are running, falling and dying. A terrible bellow fills the space and smells like burning meat. Terror breaks my mind like a sword. Freezing cold sweat moistens my body. Freezing like in nightmares [...] I know I might not get out of here [...] ¹².

A flashback follows that leads us to the sequence of events from its inception. The author takes over the narration that shifts to the third person singular and tells us about the misadventures of Ḥannā Ya‘qūb and the Druze who were condemned to exile in Belgrade.

The incidents in the novel began in Beirut in 1860: *ṣayḥ* ‘Abd al-Ġaffār, father of five Druze convicts, obtained the release of one of his sons after paying a bribe to Ismā‘īl Pasha, the governor of Mount Lebanon.

Early one morning, Ḥannā Ya‘qūb left his house and his family, with his basket full of hard-boiled eggs, taking them to the streets to sell. He arrived at the port of Beirut hoping to sell the rest of them. But as it happened, the unfortunate man was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was picked

A.K.M. Weinrich; I. Fischer, C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, London 1978, p. 10.

¹¹ Rabī‘ Ġābir, *Durūz Bilḡrād*, cit., p. 9.

¹² The selected texts from the novel have been translated by the author of this article.

up by Ottoman officers to replace the released Druze. His defense that he was a Christian and not a Druze was rejected. The French envoy who came to control the deportation did not notice that the number of prisoners had decreased, nor did he understand Ḥannā's distress, who was shouting: «“I am Ḥannā Ya'qūb the Christian”», then he asked the dragoman, who altered the translation and said that he had confessed his crime and that he was the one who had killed Ḥannā Ya'qūb, the Christian.

أنا حنّا يعقوب، مسيحي من بيروت، بيتي على حائط كنيسة مار إلياس الكاثوليك. “كان القنصل بعيداً الآن لكنّه سمع الصرخة والتفت ونظر من فوق كتفه وسأل المترجمان ماذا يقول السجين؟ أجابه المترجمان بفرنسية ممتازة وبلا تردد: “يقول أنا قتلت حنّا يعقوب، مسيحي من بيروت، بيته على حائط كنيسة مار إلياس الكاثوليك”¹³.

“I am Ḥannā Ya'qūb, a Christian from Beirut, my house is adjacent to the wall of the St. Elias Catholic Church”. The consul was far away now, but he heard the scream and turned and looked over his shoulder and asked the interpreter what the prisoner said. The translator answered him, in excellent French, without hesitation: “He says, I killed Ḥannā Ya'qūb, a Christian from Beirut, whose house was close to the wall of the Catholic Church of St. Elias”.

In addition to a threat, the Ottoman officer resorted to false promises. He told Ḥannā that the ship would only carry him to Acre, and he would return the next day loaded with gold in exchange for impersonating the Druze Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Ġaffār. Thus, Ḥannā joined the group of exiled Druze. However, he did not reach Acre, but rather ended up in Belgrade's jail.

Years of prison and suffering began. The seventy prisoners were crammed into a small room in the Belgrade Castle, which could only accommodate five people. They were given little food and forced into hard labor. They had little hope of returning to Beirut and suffered daily physical and psychological abuse. Ḥannā Ya'qūb was indeed forced to become Sulaymān 'Abd al-Ġaffār. Nobody here knew the truth of his name and personality, except for the four brothers of Sulaymān who advised him to accept his fate until relief came.

Ḥannā Ya'qūb left his home in Beirut and never returned to it. Rather, his destiny led him to Serbia and from prison to prison in the Balkan countries under Ottoman rule. The handcuffs injured his hands. The hard labor ranged from building walls and bridges, to paving roads, to repairing castles. He was only released from shackles when he was forced to work in agriculture in the harvest season. This was the case for all the Druze prisoners.

At times, he would recall the image of his house in Beirut, the faces of his wife Helena and his daughter Barbara and imagined the conditions of their daily life while he was far away from them.

¹³ Rabī' Ġābir, *Durūz Bilḡrād*, cit., p. 24.

The novel followed the actions of Helena in Beirut, where she was searching everywhere for her husband, asking everyone who could know anything, but she received no reassuring answers. She continued to hope for the return of the absent Ḥannā. But like the light of a waning candle, this hope faded more and more every day. She worked as a maid for a wealthy family to earn enough to cover living expenses and the education of her daughter.

The prisoners were transferred from one country to another depending on prevailing political conditions and whether the nations were at war or peace. They spent time in the various prisons of the Balkans. The first was the Herzegovina prison, after the Serbs bombed Belgrade in their war with the Ottomans. At various times, prisoners were transferred outside the prison to do some hard labor for the benefit of the Ottoman ruling authority.

At moments of psychological exhaustion, Ḥannā was tempted to reveal his identity and to admit his real name. The Druze detainee, Sulaymān's brother, whose character Ḥannā assumed against his will, was the one who advised him to be reasonable, considering the tense political situation in the Balkans at the time:

- لماذا لا تقولوا لراسم باشا من أكون؟ قولوا له كي أرجع إلى بيتي.
 - ماذا يفعل راسم باشا الآن؟ يقصف كنائس الصرب ويدك بيوتهم. اشكر ربك أنه لا يعرف من تكون.
 إذا قلنا له هذا مسيحي يقطع رقبتك!
 - أنا مسيحي من بيروت. لست من بلد الصرب.
 - ما الفرق؟ [...] ¹⁴.

“Why don't you tell Rāsim Pasha who I am? Tell him so that I can go back home”.

“What is Rāsim Pasha doing now? He is bombing the Churches of Serbia and destroying their homes. Thank your Lord that he does not know who you are. If we tell him: ‘This is a Christian’, he will cut your neck”.

“I am a Christian from Beirut. I am not from Serbia”.

“What is the difference? [...]”.

Besides the oppression and torture, the prisoners suffered from harsh conditions, from cold, hunger and various diseases. Faced with their common miserable fate, Ḥannā and the four Druze brothers were reconciled.

Ḥannā suffered all sorts of horror. He survived shrapnel in the wars in which he was obliged to join the Ottoman soldiers against the rebels in Serbia or in Montenegro and Bulgaria. He also survived the cholera that ravaged the Balkans. Many Druze prisoners lost their life including ‘Abd al-Ġaffār's sons, and those who remained alive became ghosts resisting death, but Ḥannā always managed to escape. After he crossed through valleys and mountains, he was exhausted, but a shepherd in Macedonia took pity on him and gave him food and water.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

In Bulgaria, he found a caravan of pilgrims on their way toward Mecca. He joined them as “the Muslim Sulaymān”. They gave him bread and dates. When he learned that the road to Mecca passed from Sofia to Adrianople to Istanbul to Damascus, he felt delighted.

From Damascus, he managed to flee again and went to Lebanon. His heart beat when he looked on the outskirts of Beirut.

فتح حنًا عينيه ورأى جبل صنّين برتقاليا. لم يصدّق [...] صعقته المفاجأة. أطلت بيروت مثلثة المآذن كما يتدكّر ها، مغمورة بنور الغروب، تسقفها أسراب الحمام. دارت الطيور في أقواس فرحة كأنّ الربّ أقام المدينة على هذا الشاطئ من أجل هذه الساعة¹⁵.

Hannā opened his eyes and saw Mount Sannine in orange color. He couldn't believe what he saw [...] he was amazed. Beirut showed herself with her triangle of minarets, as he remembered it to be, covered with the sunset light, pigeons sat on top of the minarets. Birds circled in arches of joy as if the Lord had set the city up at this beach for this specific hour.

When he reached his home, he sat on the ground in front of the door.

شعر بالأصابع على جسمه تتأكد أنّه ليس شبّحًا. حضن زوجته وابنته وبكى. شهق وملاً رئتيه بالهواء¹⁶.

He felt fingers pressing his body to make sure that he was not a ghost. He embraced his wife and daughter and cried. He inhaled and filled his lungs with air.

3. Novel References

Durūz Bilḡrād contains 10 references that Rabī' Ḡābir uses in writing his novel, especially the part dealing with the exile of a group of Druze after a bloody civil war. Some of them are in English, while others are in Arabic. They all pertain to the historical period in which the events of the novel take place. The allusion to historical references in authorship is important so we have reviewed the ones used here in order to check to what extent the author makes use of them in his novel.

Five of the ten references are more important than others. They include two Arabic books on historical events: *Mašhad al-'ayān bi-ḥawādīt Sūriyā wa Lubnān* (Eye Witness to Syria and Lebanon Incidents), written by Mīhā'il Mašāqah in 1873¹⁷, documenting prominent events in Syria and Lebanon from the late eighteenth century to the year 1873; and the above mentioned *al-Ḥarakāt fī Lubnān ilā 'ahd al-Mutašarriḡiyah*, which contains

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁷ Mīhā'il Mašāqah, *Mašhad al-'ayān bi-ḥawādīt Sūriyā wa Lubnān*, s.e., al-Qāhirah 1908.

information about the conflicts in Lebanon and the 1860 events. It should be noted that Mašāqah is a Christian, while Abū Šaqrā is a Druze. These resources show that Rabī' Ğābir has read history from both points of view.

We cite, in addition, three references written in English. The first is *Herzegovina, or Omar Pasha and the Christian Rebels*, by George Arbuthnot, published in the year 1862¹⁸. The book includes a report on Serbia and its social, political and financial situation, as well as a map of the European region that was under Ottoman control. Ğābir depended on it for geographical information regarding mountains, valleys, rivers, forests, castles and ancient bridges as well as the customs, beliefs and traditions of the people who live in those areas.

The second English reference is the book *Servia and Servians* (1862), by William Denton¹⁹. It helps to obtain information about Serbia's geography, history, historical monuments, some political observations, the Turkish influence, as well as descriptions of Belgrade's beauty.

The title of the third book by Evans Arthur defines its content: *Through Bosnia and the Herzegovina on foot during the insurrection, August and September 1875: with a historical review of Bosnia, and a glimpse at the Croats, Slavonians. And the ancient republic of Ragusa* (1876).

In fact, these references help in obtaining some general historical, geographical and social information related to Lebanon or Serbia and the regions between them.

Rabī' Ğābir, the novelist, does not care about the event itself, but he rather cares about transforming it into a novel.

4. *Facts and Fiction*

The novel *Durūz Bilġrād* includes both historical facts and scenes from the author's imagination. The historical facts are not mentioned with a documentary purpose, but because they are the events on which the author relied to build the novel. We will identify the real characters that appear in the novel and the fictional characters. The same applies to events and locations.

References are made in the novel to the following historical facts: the Civil War between the Druze and the Christians in Lebanon in 1860; the massacre of Christians in Damascus in the same year; the condemnation of some Druze accused of murder or looting and their consequent sentence to hard labor and exile to Tripoli (Libya) and Belgrade; the rise of armed rebellions from various Balkan countries against the Ottoman occupation in 1862.

¹⁸ G. Arbuthnot, *Herzegovina; or Omer Pacha and the Christian rebels: with a brief account of Servia, its social, political, and financial condition*, Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, London 1862.

¹⁹ W. Denton, *Servia and Servians*, Bell and Daldy, London 1862.

Some of the characters in the novel existed at that time, but they appear with pseudonyms. Historical sources say that 70 Druze were exiled to Belgrade and indicate their real names, whereas those mentioned in the novel bear new ones that are traditional Druze family names. As for the ruler of Mount Lebanon, the Hungarian Ismā'īl Pasha, he was in fact 'Umar Pasha the Austrian²⁰.

As for the characters created by the author, they are the following: Ḥannā Ya'qūb, the seller of boiled eggs, a Christian; his wife, Helena Constantine, a Christian survivor of the massacre in Damascus and a refugee to Beirut; and their daughter Barbara. Their neighbors are: the Sam'ān Maḥūl family; Priest Buṭrus; al-Ġaffār 'Izz al-Dīn, Druze, the father of the five sentenced; Nazlī Ḥānum, the mistress of the Governor of Belgrade, Ġawdat Pasha, or his fifth wife; officials working with Walis (governors) in the various Balkan countries; secondary characters met by Ḥannā Ya'qūb, such as prison guards, merchants and other local citizens.

The places in which the events of the novel take place are the following: Beirut: the city center, especially the area around Parliament; the port; Saray of the Ottoman ruler and Ancient markets; the Balkans: Belgrade and its Castle; Herzegovina Prison; Edirne; the Selimiye Mosque²¹; Sarajevo; the road to Dubrovnik; the bridge over the Drina River; Kosovo; Macedonia; Danube River; Sofia; Plovdiv; and Pristina.

The plot of the novel is wholly a product of the author's imagination. History books recorded that 70 Druze were exiled to Belgrade, but none of them mentioned that the father of five of those convicts pleaded with the Ottoman Governor, begging and bribing him, to release his five sons, and that the governor agreed to liberate only one. Historical accounts do not mention that therefore there was a shortage of the number of exiles, and a need to complete them, which led to Ḥannā Ya'qūb's unfortunate fate.

Even if all historians' writings were satisfied with mentioning the news of the exile to Belgrade, they never described the suffering of the prisoners, nor the events they experienced. The author's imagination provides everything that was experienced by Ḥannā Ya'qūb from the time he left his home with a basket of hard-boiled eggs until his return to it after 12 years. The author enhances the story by including what was associated with Ya'qūb's absence and how that affects the material and psychological life of his wife, who was divided between hope and despair. And all the dia-

²⁰ An officer of Balkan origins who converted to Islam and was called 'Umar Pasha the Austrian. He worked in the service of the Ottoman Empire. In 1860 he was the ruler of Mount Lebanon.

²¹ Ottoman imperial mosque located in Edirne, commissioned by Sultan Selim II, considered by its architect Sinan to be his masterpiece and one of the highest achievements of Islamic architecture.

logues exchanged by the characters throughout the novel are the fruits of the imagination of the author.

5. *Past and Present*

The novelist was primarily concerned with treating a historical event and referring to actual events and places, but his imagination enriched the narration. The events of the novel took place in the second half of the nineteenth century but are clearly linked to what happened in the second half of the twentieth century, and even to current realities. The past sends an implicit message to the present. The events of the novel and its characters are a bridge between history and reality.

The civil wars that Lebanon experienced during the events in the novel resemble those that occurred between 1975 and 1990. The Lebanese society has not yet recovered from their negative effects.

Foreign powers intervened in the past: the Ottomans mounted the Druze against the Christians, and the French supported the Maronites. Later, the major powers reconciled. Their common interests dictated their political positions. The Lebanese society was forced to pay the price for wars fought on its land on behalf of others. These events correspond to those of the twentieth century.

The adversities suffered by the Lebanese in their country, and the reconciliations between them during their residence in foreign countries are frequently the same in the past as in the present. Lebanese solidarity in exile is the antithesis of their disharmony in the motherland.

It should be noted that the author does not warn about the link between past events and the reality of the present. Rather, he does not mention the present at all. But the similarity of events in the two epochs leads the reader to the comparison, and thus he concludes the congruence.

6. *Imagination through Narrative Techniques*

The author Rabī' Ġābir used various elements of the art of narration to ensure the success of the reception:

A. *Imagination/Characters*

The invented figures in the novel are typical of real people of the time, they could have existed. First: Ḥannā Ya'qūb, the main character created by the author's imagination. Without this character, *Durūz Bilḡrād* would lack the dramatic development effect. His dilemma is the engine of events throughout the novel. He is the example of the poor Christian, a victim, in this civil war. His existence provided the possibility to describe the relationship between Christians and Druze in its various stages, from confrontation to mutual un-

derstanding, followed by remorse, forgiveness and reconciliation. Without him, the novel would have been confined to depicting the psychological suffering of the Druze exiles. In addition, his personality reveals the social and psychological aspects of a person whose Christian counterparts suffered the same hardships.

Moreover, the creation of the characters of his wife Helena and his daughter Barbara strengthens Ya'qūb's psychological state of, since his absence affected not only himself, but also his family. As for the presence of the neighbors and the priest Buṭrus, it allows the development of the drama of Helena, and explains the psychological conditions that she suffered. And the presence of all of them sheds light on the social and economic conditions of the lower classes during that period.

Another invented character, 'Abd al-Ġaffār, father of the five Druze sentenced to exile, generates the action of the novel: the absence of one of the exiles and the need to find an alternative lead to Ḥannā's victimization. It also reveals the Ottoman governor's corruption, in Beirut as well as in the various Balkan countries. For instance, Ğawdat Pasha and his concubine Nazlī forced Druze prisoners to cultivate their private fields.

B. Imagination/Locations

The locations chosen by the author are real, but their function in the context of the novel is the product of his imagination.

Based on history, 400 of those sentenced were exiled to Tripoli (Libya) and 70 to Belgrade, as we have already said in the previous pages. The author could trace the exiles either to Tripoli or Belgrade. Choosing Tripoli was particularly plausible because it received the largest number of exiles. The choice of Belgrade, instead, inspired the author and allowed him to enrich the narrative because Belgrade and the other Balkan places have abundant geographical, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. They also have different sorts of customs and traditions, whereas in Tripoli everything is monochromatic. The geography is limited to a desert surrounding the city. There is no demographic diversity, because all the population is Sunni Muslim (like the Ottomans), and there is no religious conflict between them and the Ottomans.

In *Durūz Bilḡrād* we notice different types of descriptions that perform multiple functions, among them the realistic function, that is the most appropriate type as regards the historical novel. The places mentioned in Rabī' Ğābir's novel are realistic, but the events narrated stem from the author's imagination. Therefore, Ğābir uses description of these places to convince the reader of the events' reality.

Among the factors that made a scene in the historical novel, the geographical location of the event may be indicated, as well as the characters'

professions, their traditions, the environment and the period in which the event occurred. When these features are tiled with one another, the scene is complete in the novel. So, the scene is a section of the fictional act that is written in detail and without a summary²². To present a complete scene in his novel, Rabī' Ġābir uses a panoramic view of the city, village, castle, prison, etc., and describes the features and elements that perform an important function in the novel. In the following scene, the narrator sees the landscape through the prisoners' eyes; therefore, he focuses on the yellow river and the burned bridge, rather than portraying these beautiful scenes:

أمطار الخريف وقعت عليهم بينما يتمددون في عربات تجرّها ثيران. بلغوا نهراً أصفر المياه بعد ليلة أضاءتها البروق من دون أن يسقط مطر [...] نزلوا عند جسر خشبي محروق. قسّموهم إلى مجموعتين. حتّى ذهب للحفر ونقل الحجارة. شغيلة أجراء وسخرة سيقوهم إلى المقلع ونقروا تلاً من الحجارة الضخمة. قبل حلول الظهيرة دبّ فيهم الإنهاك. الضفّة عريضة رملية، والأقدام تغوص [...] ²³.

The autumn rain fell on them as they lay in vehicles pulled by oxen. They reached a river of yellow water after a rainless night lit by lightnings [...] They passed a burnt wooden bridge and were divided into two groups. Ḥannā went to dig and transport stones. Coerced laborers working for free preceded them to the quarry and dug a hill of huge stones. Before noon, they were exhausted. The riverbank was sandy, and the feet sank in [...].

Moreover, in the novel *Durūz Bilḡrād* Rabī' Ġābir considers the harmony between nature and the psychological states of characters. For example, while describing the fields which the main character passes through within the queue of prisoners, Ġābir does not focus on the aesthetic aspect of nature, but rather on the sad face of it, as it is not possible for a prisoner to enjoy seeing green fields.

أزكمت أنوفهم رائحة السنابل المحصودة والمكومة. أطلّت من فوق الأكوام الضخمة وجوه ناعسة وبواريد تحرس المحصول. توقّف الجنود. تكلموا مع الفلاحين. بدأ أنّهم أضاعوا الطريق. أحد المحابيس ركع على ركبة واحدة ونام: ارتفع شخيرته. تحرّك الطابور [...] ²⁴.

Their noses were stuffed with the smell of harvested and stacked hyacinths. From above the huge piles, drowsiness, sleepy faces appeared with guns guarding the crop. The soldiers stopped, they talked to the peasants and they seemed to have lost their way. One prisoner kneeled on one knee and snoozed: his snoring rose. The queue moved [...].

²² Bīkhām, Ġ.M., *Ṣaḥnih va sāḥtār dar dāstān*, Tarḡumih-i Parīsā Ḥusravī Sāmānī, Raseš, Tehrān 2009, p. 44.

²³ Rabī' Ġābir, *Durūz Bilḡrād*, cit., p. 163.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

C. Imagination and Incidents

All the events invented by the author could have happened: the arrival of the boiled egg seller to the port is natural and logical due to the proximity of the place to his home, and the port is a place where crowds of people gather, some to welcome arrivals or farewell departing travelers, as well as customs employees, workers, and porters. All those were potential customers.

The ruse that the Ottoman officer in the port of Beirut used to force Ḥannā Ya'qūb to join the exiles was propitious because Ismā'īl Pasha accepted the bribe and decided to free one prisoner.

Historians only tell us that the Druze exiles were sent to Belgrade prison. They do not talk at all about the transfer of prisoners from jail to jail in the Balkans. The war between the Serbs and the Ottomans in 1862 provided the author with the opportunity to move them to other places in the Balkans and allowed him to “diversify” the events and locations. Each country has its own landscapes, traditions, and people’s own styles of behavior. It means the multiplicity of images and colors.

The transfer of prisoners was also justified due to the spread of cholera or the outbreak of the great fire. And the travel of Balkanised Muslims in pilgrimage caravans heading to Mecca allowed Ḥannā Ya'qūb to escape by joining them. They considered him a Muslim called Sulaymān ‘Abd al-Ġaffār and not Ḥannā Ya'qūb, the Christian. After he arrived with them in Damascus, he easily escaped from the Syrian capital to Beirut.

D. Imagination and Narration’s Style

The events and characters imagined in the novel include the elements that contributed to creating suspense in the novel; what arouses the reader’s passion, according to “Reception Theory”, is one of the effects that guarantee a positive reception. Ġābir’s style of narration relies on the element of suspense in several scenes.

The suspense began when Ḥannā started shouting in the port to avoid exile, saying: «I am Ḥannā Ya'qūb the Christian»²⁵. The French Consul, who was there to monitor prisoners’ deportation, only understood the egg salesman’s name. When he asked why he was screaming, the translator maliciously replied: «He says: “I killed Ḥannā Ya'qūb, a Christian from Beirut [...]”»²⁶. Later in the novel, the author will take advantage of this situation. After Helena’s exhausting searches for her husband with the help of neighbors and Priest Buṭrus, some witnesses reported that they heard a man shouting: «I am the one who killed Ḥannā Ya'qūb» and this killer was deported to Belgrade. This rumor created great tension in Helena, and she continued

²⁵ Cf. footnote 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

to struggle with believing the news and trying to deny it, hoping for Ḥannā's return.

The plot of the novel explores the juxtaposition between what is happening in the Balkans and at the same time in Beirut. On the one hand, there is the physical and psychological suffering of the prisoner in the Balkan's jails who does not know when he will get rid of the pain of the body, and he cannot find a satisfactory answer about his fate. He is always thinking about his wife and daughter, and always afraid of their fate. On the other hand, there are Helena's desperate attempts to find out what happened to her husband as well as her constant struggle to secure a livelihood and to be able to raise her daughter on her own. They are both "sans savoir" about their destiny, and this lack of knowledge is transmuted to the reader, thereby increasing his/her curiosity.

Since the beginning of the novel, Ḥannā was forced to deny his identity and to impersonate the character of Sulaymān the Druze. The reader is haunted by questions such as: Will anyone discover the truth of his person? Will he admit that he is Ḥannā? This was what Ya'qūb once sought to do, but one of 'Abd al-Ġaffār's sons dissuaded him because of the dangers involved, such as the hostility between the Ottomans and the Serbs. Ḥannā's admission that he was Christian would have put his life in danger. Just as the author created suspense related to the name of the egg seller, he sharpened the reader's interest when Ya'qūb's pseudonym allowed for his salvation on the day he joined the caravan of pilgrims.

The torment endured by detainees in Balkan prisons, ending in death for most of them, including 'Abd al-Ġaffār's sons, contributed to the atmosphere of suspense. Will Ḥannā face the same fate? Will he die in detention? And if he was destined to survive, could he escape and return to Beirut?

Conclusion

Rabī' Ġābir wrote a novel based on historical facts, but despite the facts and due to his rich imagination, it remained a work of fiction with realistic portrayals, situations, dialogues and characters in a way that seems truthful.

To achieve this goal, he made use of aesthetic methods such as descriptions in the text to serve his historical narration. He also adopted a balance between fiction and history, though the fictional share was greater than the share of historical reality in the novel.

The historical facts are not mentioned with a documentary purpose, and the author did not call upon history to argue with it or to take a position in favor of one of the parties in this conflict against the other, because the Lebanese present is almost a re-edition of the past. Without referring to that war, it could have been a detective novel about a person who was taken by a ruse in the place of another person and subjected to torments in exile prisons

and to the same dangers that the protagonist was exposed to. However, the author wrote a social history and depicted the lives of people in a specific “dark period” in the history of his country. He also performed a psychological analysis of the characters that were made up of the humble common people and he also portrayed their pain and sorrows.

Building on the events of the past war, portraying its horrors, consequences, and the suffering of its victims, the novel is closely related to the present. The civil wars that Lebanon experienced during the events of the novel resemble the one occurred between 1975 and 1990.

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